

# Aggressive Homeowners

Best Practices for Staying Safe During Encounters with Aggressive Members of the Public



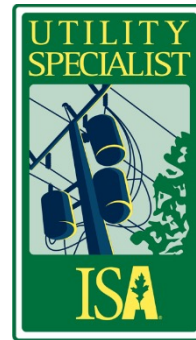
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# Why Train on This?



# This Talk Will Cover:

- Example of Policies
- Understanding of Easements
- De-escalation
- Possible Unsafe Situations
- Best Practices
- Suggested Mitigations





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# First... a Disclaimer

There is no certain type of neighborhood, nor certain group of people that are more or less likely to be aggressive.

Be vigilant, always. And focus on keeping calm.



You could do everything “right” in a situation, and have no guarantee that it will turn out okay

The goal is to keep the situation from escalating, and getting to safety.



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# Suggested Policy on Unsafe Situations



- An employee is never expected to remain in an unsafe situation.
- The expectation is that they leave unsafe situations, then document them to prevent a future incident.

# Suggested Policy on Reporting



- If an unsafe situation with an aggressive member of the public is encountered, documentation is required.
- We do this also to keep future technicians or other contractors safe.





# Weapons



- Possession of weapons has been shown to escalate contentious encounters
- Most Utilities, cities or other tree care clients have policies against carrying weapons on their jobsites
- For these purposes, we consider a weapon to be considered an item designed for use on other people

# Easements

- An easement is a right in which a non-owner of the land can use the owner's land for a specific purpose.
- Other examples include:
  - City Easements
  - Landlocked Properties
  - HOA's/Shared spaces in developments



# Easements

- Easements are part of the deed for the land but can vary widely in details.
  - Know the width of the easement in the areas you're working!
- Easements allow for ingress and egress of a property to inspect and maintain utility lines.
- Legally do not require notice – but should be given when practical.



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# What is an “Aggressive Homeowner”?

Anyone:

- Property owner, tenant, neighbor, or member of the public
- Makes us concerned for our physical safety
- Engages in harassing behavior



# What is an “Aggressive Homeowner”?

- Making threats against you or other potential tree care workers
- Physically intimidating
- Person is carrying or brandishing weapons
- Biased and verbally abusive
- Stalking behavior
- Homeowner does not let you leave property
- Most seriously – someone who uses a weapon, pursues, or attempts to cause harm to you



# Responding to Hostility

- a) Assess the situation
- b) De-escalate
- c) Walk Away
- d) Document and Report



# Assess the Situation



- Where are you? Who else is nearby?
- What route will you take to exit?
- Do you have cellphone reception?
- What is this person's tone or body language?
- Are they armed?



# De-Escalation



## 1. Don't take it personally

- Respond calmly, without blame or being defensive





# De-Escalation



## 2. Reset your objectives

- Go beyond simply 'delivering a message' or 'gaining approval'
- One objective should be to actively listen, with empathy



# De-Escalation



## 3. Identify and validate that you've heard their concern

- “You must be frustrated”
- “You must care about this tree”
- “You’re upset with the communication about this”



# De-Escalation



## 4. Enroll them in the conversation

- Work their interests into the plan
- Highlight mutual benefits
- Offer choices that are both acceptable to give a sense of agency



# Walk Away



- Have a “line in the sand”
- Empower workers to trust their gut and leave situations
- Work through alternative options for the jobsite



# Document and Report

- Require reporting of threats and incidents
- Establish a process for internal and external reporting
- Cooperation between utilities and contractors on known trouble sites





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# Examples of Hostile Situations



# Making Threats

What about when members of the public make threats against you or other potential tree workers?

Real example: “I’d just as soon shoot the next one of ya before I let you touch my trees again.”

# Making Threats

- Such threats need to be taken seriously
- Remain courteous, and leave the property
- File police report
- Inform client (utility, city, etc.) to protect future workers





# Intimidation

## Use of physical intimidation:

- Invading personal space
- Aggressive posture and clenched fists
- Big gestures



# Intimidation

- Remain courteous, do not escalate the situation
- Back away to a comfortable distance as necessary
- Leave and report if you feel threatened.



# Armed Individuals

Person is carrying or brandishing weapons

- Assess the context of situation
- Open carry is common in many areas
  - A holstered handgun is not *necessarily* cause for alarm on its own in places where open carry is common



# Armed Individuals

- Behave with heightened concern if a person is:
  - Carrying a firearm in their hands
  - Hand on their holster
- If someone feels threatened:
  - Wish them a nice day and leave
  - Report internally at your company
  - Consider police report depending on situation



# Biased Incidents

- Verbally abusive based on appearance
- Harassment from homeowners that is motivated by:
  - Race
  - Gender
  - Sexuality (perceived or otherwise)
  - Accent

# Biased Incidents

- Policy and training suggestion:
  - Have a commitment to support the well-being of your team.
  - Train field staff that they do not have to put up with any harassment from homeowners.
  - That they may choose to leave the jobsite or may choose to complete it if it is safe to do so.



# Biased Incidents

- Policy and training suggestion:
  - There is a time and a place for “educating” biased individuals. While completing tree work on their property is not that time.
  - Do not escalate the situation.



# Biased Incidents

## Employee Wellbeing:

- Train lone-workers to call their supervisor to explain what happened and decompress
- Make it safe to have conversations about these encounters
- Assess whether it's even worth sending someone else back to that site if possible.





# Stalking

- A person follows a lone worker from jobsite to jobsite, or beyond:
  - A resident who isn't satisfied with the interaction at their home
  - A tenacious "neighborhood watch" type
  - Someone overly interested in a lone worker
  - The same vehicle/driver has passed by multiple times



# Stalking

- It may not always be possible or wise to approach these individuals. Use discretion if making contact.
  - Contact any supervisors or coworkers in the area
  - Request that they swing by to show support
- Make record of this individual: description of person and/or vehicle
- Consider involving law enforcement



# “Captive” Situations

- Homeowner does not let worker leave property until they are satisfied or until police arrive
  - Homeowner physically blocks path
  - Homeowner has blocked the vehicle from being able to leave



# “Captive” Situations



- NEVER enter the home of a stranger for any reason
  - Decline invitations for refreshments
  - Insist on going around through side gate, not through the house



# “Captive” Situations



- Remain calm – more importantly: Confident
- Contact company management or utility partner
- Cooperate with police, if they are involved



# Violence

## Most serious and dangerous situations:

- Physical Assault
  - Almost any contact could be considered assault
- Releasing dogs on worker
- Someone uses a weapon
  - Aimed at you or a warning shot – doesn't matter
- Gives chase if worker tries to leave



# Violence



- Defend yourself as necessary
- Leave area immediately and with urgency
- Call 911 if warranted
- Report once safe to do so

# If Held at Gunpoint



## 1. Remain Calm

- Control breathing
- Think positive/grounding thoughts





# If Held at Gunpoint

## 2. Comply with instructions\*

- Keep hands visible
- Keep movements slow
- Inform them if you are reaching into your pocket

\*Do not comply with instructions that might result in abduction



# If Held at Gunpoint



## 3. Protect self, not possessions

- Don't worry about personal or company property
- Focus on staying safe



# If Held at Gunpoint

4. Resist only if they turn violent or attempt to abduct you.
  - Fight back only in self-defense
  - When fleeing, run for cover and unpredictably



# Other Considerations: Mental State

- Inebriated individuals
- Mental faculty:
  - Alzheimer's, dementia, etc.
  - Mental disability
- Consider returning later or alternative methods of contact



# Other Considerations: Prevention



- Make appropriate attempts at contact
  - Require knock before beginning work on property
  - Make phone calls when option is available
- Maintain Professional Appearance
  - Company ID and uniform
  - Marked vehicles
  - Hard hat + high visibility gear

# Actions Utilities Can Take to Help

- Provide Contractor and Employee ID badges
  - Logos and Contractor magnets for vehicles
- Notice to customers about work
  - Updated contractor company list for website and customer service
- Established process for reporting incidents:
  - Sharing and requesting list of known addresses of concern prior to work
  - Maintaining database of blacklisted clients



# Review



- Employees should believe they are never to remain in a dangerous situation
- Train field staff to:
  - Practice methods of de-escalation
  - Leave and report as unsafe or hostile interactions occur
  - Always strive to appear calm and confident, and to not escalate situations
- Appropriate preventative measures are crucial
- Prioritize safety over personal or company property



# Questions?

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